

## OLD GRAHAM'S PHILATEIC TALES 2

**Jean De Sperati** was the most technically competent forger of the last century. Born in Pisa, Italy on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1884, he learned his trade from his mother and his two elder brothers. The young de Serati became fascinated with printing techniques, paper types, photography, and stamp collecting. The “family business” of operating an extensive mail order forgery business was closed down in March 1909 in Pisa, with mother and brothers escaping the Italian police, who had to be content in seizing their equipment and supplies.

How did he produce his fakes? He created new engravings of the stamps rather than use the crude lithographic process favoured by his contemporaries. To further fool the experts, he would purchase less value stamps from the correct period, chemically remove the image, and then print the fake image onto the correct paper. The fake would then be sent to an expert, and many were returned with Certificates of Authenticity. These he would put up for auction, or offer them to a dealer in a city other than where the experts resided. By the 1920s, he was also producing suitable cancels to go with his works, limited to the larger cities to avoid attracting attention.

Following his marriage in August 1914, Jean De Sperati, lived in Paris, and other French locations. He worked in factories by day, and forged stamps at night. In 1930, he moved to Aix-les-Bains, and became a full time stamp forger. During the active part of his career (from about 1910 to 1953), he produced some 566 varieties and forged the stamps of nearly 100 countries. It has been estimated that he produced around 70,000 individual stamps. To achieve this, he worked 14 to 16 hours per day, often into the middle of the night, every day of the week.

French law permitted the private production of postage stamps, as long as they were sold as imitations. De Sperati would sign his works in easily erasable soft pencil as such. However, during the Second World War he fell foul of the law preventing the exportation of capital from France. In 1943, French Customs Officials seized correspondence from him containing 18 forgeries addressed to an Expertizer in Lisbon. He was arrested on the charge of exporting capital in the form of rare postage stamps to the value of 300,000 Francs.

A lengthy legal action pursued. De Sperati claimed that he had forgotten to mark his reproductions. Two separate panels of experts were brought in, and after a thorough examination, the stamps were declared genuine. De Sperati then produced several additional sets of the same forgeries to prove to the Court that he was producing imitations and not exporting valuable original stamps.. He won his case finally in 1948 but was fined a nominal 5000 Francs for disturbing the smooth operation of French Customs. The publicity helped his operation for the next ten years.

Failing eyesight caused De Sperati in 1953 to sell his stock of forgeries, reference collections, and printing materials to the British Philatelic Association for an un-disclosed sum. He agreed to make no further forgeries. The BPA even mounted an exhibition of his works in London in the spring of 1954. However, despite his advanced years, he continued to produce forgeries up to his death in 1957, in his own words “just for fun”. Sperati forgeries are now highly collectable and are sometimes worth more than the original stamps. In 2007, Sotheby's sold a collection of 1500 known Sperati forgeries, one of which sold for £3270. Others languish in collections today, cherished by their unsuspecting owners who purchased them through legitimate channels.